

**MINUTES OF THE BLACK BELT COMMISSION
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING
April 8, 2014**

The Black Belt Commission Executive Committee met Tuesday, April 8, 2014 at **The Pie Lab** in Greensboro, Alabama with **Pam Dorr** as guest speaker. Nisa Miranda and Michael Brooks hosted lunch. The following were in attendance:

Ron Sparks, Director, Alabama Rural Development Office
Sheldon Day, Co-Chair
Chad Nichols, Co-Chair, Health Committee
Dr. David Hale, Chair, Communications Committee
David Hooks, Chair, Manufacturing Committee
John Zippert, Chair, Agriculture Committee
Dr. Carol Zippert, Chair, Cultural and Youth Committee
John Deamer, Black Belt Community Foundation (For Felecia Jones)
Donald Mills, Chair, Small Business Committee
Oscar Berry, Congresswoman Sewell's Office
Nyeshia Campell, Congresswoman Sewell's Office
William Scott, Co-Chair, Infrastructure
John Clyde Riggs, Alabama Tombigbee Regional Planning Commission
Tyson Howard, Director, South Central Alabama Development Commission
Bob Lake, Director, West Alabama Regional Council
Ginger Stewart, Project Manager
Thomas Moore, Project Manager
Candy Capel, Project Manager
Emily Law, BBC Executive Director
Larry Taylor, Guest
Quinn Stewart, Guest

Sheldon Day, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order and welcomed and thanked everyone for coming. **Ron** reiterated the same thoughts.

Sheldon introduced **Pam Dorr with H.E.R.O.** in Greensboro. **H.E.R.O.** stands for Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization and works as a catalyst for community development in the Black Belt to end rural poverty. As a non-profit, **H.E.R.O.** provides economic development, community resources, housing education and affordable housing construction. When funding is available, they also provide youth programming.

Pam spoke about the projects she's involved with in Greensboro:

1. The housing program,
2. Bikes made from bamboo,
3. Storefront renovation of the block of buildings housing **Pie Lab** and the adjoining block.
4. Pam invited members of the Executive Committee to go across the street to see the bikes made from bamboo. It was amazing to view the process.

5. Bikes have been shipped to France, Germany, Italy and Spain filling orders. In addition, people can come to Greensboro over a weekend and participate in building their own bike. Costs range from \$600 to \$1,200.
 - Pam talked about many other businesses and projects in progress:
 - A daycare business,
 - Candy making using local pecans and honey,
 - Mainstreet revitalization project,
 - Getting lights for the bike shop,
 - Building affordable housing for the homeless and
 - A horseshoe farm project.
 - University of Kansas is working with individual production of bikes.
 - Developed prototype on how to set up production line.
 - In partnership with 100 martial artists building house in weekend.
 - She talked about Habitat for humanity and working with John Zippert ten years ago.
 - H.E.R.O. is working to secure funds to provide housing in the \$20,000, \$30,000 and \$40,000 range. Also houses for persons with disabilities.
 - Her dad moved to Greensboro eight years ago to help with projects.

In addition, **H.E.R.O.** provides home ownership counseling to Hale County families providing them with monthly homeownership workshops free of cost, to help families learn about the home buying process.

Sheldon asked everyone to introduce themselves.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE – John Zippert, Chair, ;Candy Capel, Program Manager, reported –

- Committee continues to work on the Black Belt Fruit and Vegetable Marketing Center due to problems that have occurred with bidder and contracts.
- Marion Bank and Trust approached committee about possibility of looking at the Taylorville Building out on Highway 80 which is a good location and it is out of the flood plain.
- The committee and Tuskegee are looking closely at this property.
- There has been \$2 million allocated by the legislature.
- Taylorville price tag is \$1 million

Sheldon stated there might be some work to do right up front but this might be a doable transaction.

COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE – Dr. David Hale, Chair, Ginger Stewart. Program Manager reported:

- Committee has been working on Connecting Alabama
- Service here in Black Belt Region is nonexistent.
- Working on Apps for birding trail. Thirty sights have been identified.

- Working on website for birding and camping.
- Reported on Conference in Guntersville
- Pinebelt developing fiber network that we did not know we had.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE - Felecia Jones, Chair, John Deamer, BBCF, reported-

- Committee met on Monday, March 31, 2014.
- Ongoing project is to continue the Leadership Development instruction of elected officials in the Black Belt.
- Program would be a **Certified Black Belt Municipal Officials Program**.
- Curriculum or program of sessions will be drafted and a certificate will be awarded.
- Next training session is planned for July or August, 2014.
- Next Committee meeting is scheduled for May 9, 2014.

CULTURAL AND YOUTH – Dr. Carol Zippert, Chair, Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported –

- In three-way partnership with Black Belt Community Foundation and State Council on the Arts.
- Received grant in the amount of \$150,000 which supports the arts council.
- Use funds for bigger projects such as a festival
- \$100,000 in smaller grants
- April 15th has to be a community based group
- Arts project- community group can partner.
- Looking for other funds that focus on the arts
- Awards presentation to these communities. Orrville June 21st date, giving out by April 15th.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE – Dr. Daniel Boyd, Chair, Ginger Stewart, Project Manager, reported on three projects:

- There is no grant money for Education summit this year.
- State Department of Education professional development for Black Belt teachers.

State School Superintendents of Alabama & Black Belt Priorities/Concerns:

- SSA Funding Priorities—OCE, Transportation, COLA, Current Units: OCE is used for maintenance costs, utility bills, and to meet unfunded state mandates (i.e., defibrillator machines in every school). Transportation is a huge cost for many districts, especially in rural areas. Transportation has not been fully funded since 2008. Transportation has a general purpose fund (fuel and driver pay) and fleet renewal money (special, smaller buses cost more because of lifts and air conditioning). COLA (cost of living) more than likely will be increased 2%, but PEEHIP will likely also go up, so it will negate the raise. Current Units relates to numbers of teachers awarded based on number of students.
- Black Belt Priorities—Grants, Educational Summit, Student Summer Activities: The committee is working on grant applications to help with costs. Education summits have been helpful in the past and we hope to continue with those as well

as scholarships for student summer activities. There are no funds to conduct the education summit this year.

Education Committee Updates:

- Race to the Top: A proposal was submitted to the US Department of Education but funds were not awarded.
- 2014 SITE Scholarship: We have one scholarship from the University of Alabama that will allow our committee to select a student from the Black Belt to attend the Student Introduction to Engineering program this summer free of charge.
- Workforce Development Board Grant for the Black Belt: Two school districts (Perry County and Lowndes County) received this grant from the federal government through ADECA and the workforce investment board. It is going very well.
- Teach for America: From approximately 2005 through 2009, Superintendents of the Black Belt had some difficulties securing qualified teachers. In effort to assist schools across the Black Belt, this committee and the Black Belt Superintendents Coalition have worked with Teach for America, and the results have been positive. Seven Teach for America teachers are currently in Lowndes County and about 25 more are throughout the Black Belt.
- Library Grant: Perry and Lowndes Counties received a grant last year from the federal government to open libraries on Saturdays and have Kindle Fires available for families to check out. The libraries have seen high usage numbers on Saturdays. This is the second year of the grant, which ends June 30, 2014.

Education Committee New Initiatives

- Black Belt Consortium (Department of Labor/Education) Proposal: Bullock, Dallas, Perry, Wilcox, and Lowndes Counties together submitted a proposal for funding. No word yet, but they are hopeful. This will allow dual enrollment credit for students, who can earn college credits while still in high school by taking classes at Wallace Community College Selma during grades 9-12. The summer of grades 10 and 11, the students must work in industry. The problem that may weaken chances of having this funding is that plants will not allow people under 18 to work in their factories. Margaret Bentley, Ron Sparks, and Billy Beasley wrote support letters. A decision should be made in March. If funded, the grant would spread \$4.4 million across five districts.
- **Education Summit** (June 2014): These have been a great success in past years (the first focused on dropout prevention; the second, on dropout prevention and reading; and the third and fourth were on multiple topics). The comments from participants have been glowing. A TIF (Teacher Incentive Fund) grant allowed us to have them in the past and pay for facilities. The first year, all speakers worked pro bono, but we have had to pay some speakers in years two-four. This year, there are no funds to support a summit as we've had in the past.

FAMILIES COMMITTEE – Dave Dagostino, Chair – Ginger Stewart, Project Manager reported:

Dagostino is in Texas and did not have a report.

HEALTH COMMITTEE — Congresswoman Terri Sewell and Chad Nichols, Co-Chairs:

- April 22nd - eyecare screening in Perry County.
- State funds 6th graders to be vision screened.
- All children over course of school year fail eye screenings. 80 to 100 kids.
- Glasses are provided free of charge to families. Staff comes and hand delivers them.
- KidCheck Program has eight events scheduled
- Two upcoming events on the 10th and 24th.
- We continue to work on dialysis in Butler County
- Frances Ford – trying to get critical care in Perry County.
- Oscar Berry of Congresswoman Sewell's office – talked about the absence of Medicaid in State.
- Completed enrollment for ACA; lot of constituents to get coverage
- We actually have critical situation with hospitals trying to find solutions to problems
- Talked about how many have actually signed on for ACA.
- Starting to see some movement to get Medicaid expansion.

Ron reported on healthcare in the BlackBelt. 1980 infant mortality was 48; now losing 558 babies . We desperately need to do something about this problem. We have another crises in Alabama and that is **strokes and lack of treatment availability**. We need stroke portals like one in SE Alabama in Dothan. Passed legislation that health care providers have got several hundred thousand dollars. The stroke portal at Montgomery Baptist South is the only location in Montgomery. It's going to take changes to get better.

INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE – Noopie Cosby, Chair - Thomas Moore, Program Manager, reported:

- Thomas reported Noopie has been concentrating on organizing the **Black Belt Legislative Caucus** with the assistance of **Senator Beasley** in order to have more political involvement to make things happen to include the following:
 1. Coosa/Alabama dredging – lost thousands of jobs because the river has to be dredged. Taking proper steps to get this done. Had talks with Corps of Engineers, Roby and Aderholt are in position to help.
 2. Senator Gerald Dial is working on space ports to be developed in the Black Belt. Did article regarding the space port idea.
 3. Organizing Caucus. The 12 counties in the Black Belt represent 9 representatives, 6 senators out of 35. We are including Clarke, Lee and Montgomery in the caucus.

MANUFACTURING COMMITTEE – David Hooks, Chair, Candy Capel, Project Manager, reported-

- Goal of the committee would be monthly conference calls on last Friday of each month at 10 a.m. Members can call in or have alternate sit on call. Members should notify Candy Capel regarding attendance.
- Meeting in person a couple of times a year is also a goal.
- Key issues include: The perception of what Selma is really like.
- Mayor Grayson stated the perception problem is true for the entire state.
- Workforce Development has been identified as another issue. It was suggested that Ed Castile be at next meeting of the committee. Some of the efforts of this committee could be coordinated with the Workforce Committee.
- Tim Wood suggested using the manufacturing roundtable model in Selma for the efforts of the committee. It was suggested that the committee could work on putting together a roundtable for the entire Black Belt.
- Export was identified as important issue, along with transportation and immigration issues.
- Members would like to see the TennTom utilized more and partner with other states, especially Mississippi.
- Dredging of the Alabama River by the Corps of Engineers is a priority.
- Next meeting will be April 25th at ADECA.

MARKETING & TOURISM–Wimberly Comer, Co-Chair – Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported –

- The **Historic U.S. Hiway 80 Sale** April 18 and 19. This sale begins in Longview, Tx and travels through Louisiana, Mississippi and on through Alabama along U.S. 80 and beyond. Second regional meeting held March 11th.
- **Completed projects:**
- **Audio Tours:** The Heritage area is working with local communities to create audio tours that visitors can call into or see on their smartphone or internet. Monroeville audio tour/with signage will be unveiled on April 17...it is GREAT! Current audio tours are being created in Sumter County, Lowndesboro, Camden and Old Cahawba. Audio tours have also been completed in Marion.
- **In Progress:**
- **Market Research:** The Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area and Alabama Black Belt Adventures are partnering on a regional marketing initiative to better understand who are current and potential visitors and what the region can do to better market to potential visitors. Three workshops will be held in the summer to share research.
- **Video:** Linda Vice and the Heritage area are working on a promotional video about the heritage, cultural, and natural history of the region.
- **Heritage Area Legislation:** Alabama Black Belt Heritage continues to move toward national designation.
- **Downtown Walking Tours:** Greensboro, Old Cahawba, Demopolis and Marion are working with the Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area to create printable downtown walking tours.

- **ENewsletter:** Creating a monthly regional e-newsletter to be distributed that announces regional events and tourism/community development projects throughout the Black Belt. Goal is to send the first one this month.
- **Black Belt Birding Trail:** Black Belt sites are planning birding events in partnership with the Alabama Birding Trail for 2014.
- **Civil Rights Anniversaries:** Linda Vice is working with local sites to plan events across the Black Belt celebrating upcoming civil rights anniversaries.
- **Black Belt Treasures** is sponsoring a group to Western North Carolina to visit local towns/organizations with HandMade in America which have successfully used arts in regional economic development.

SMALL BUSINESS COMMITTEE – Donald Mills, Chair, Ginger Stewart, Program Manager, reported:

- **April 29 Youth Entrepreneurial Summit.** The summit will be held at the Livingston Community Center. Invitations have been sent to schools. Hunter Adams, an attorney specializing in intellectual property law, has been secured as a speaker. Brandy Gibson will again present on business etiquette.
- Projected attendance is students. Gary Walton, who always helps with Greene County, was asked to follow up with them. A letter was sent to Demopolis High School, John Essex High School in Demopolis, Sumter's Central High School, and Sumter Academy. If twenty-five students from each targeted school were to attend, there would be 125 students total. Stewart asked that Mills send her a flyer so she could forward it to Emily Law for distribution to the Executive Committee. Eddie Postell suggested a press release from the committee.
- Home Grown conference is tentatively set for September 26 at Shelton State Community College.
- 20/20 has no confirmed date as of yet, but Mills said October might work.
- Mills said that "Mama Hamill" of the popular Jackson, MS, restaurant has not yet confirmed her availability for the September 26th conference and asked Gibson to follow up with her. Gibson agreed and said she had also contacted some potential speakers for the 20/20 conference and would email those names to Mills.
- A conference call will be set for April 17. All summit materials will be sent to the committee prior to that date. In the meantime, Stewart will contact the teen entrepreneur about speaking at the summit.
- April 29th Youth Entrepreneur Summit (Y.E.S.) Livingston, AL

SKILLS TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT – Ed Castile Chair, Dr. Ken Tucker, Co-Chair, Candy Cappel, Project Manager, reported-

- Candy reported on the workforce strategic plan.
- List of influencers has been assembled from all members and has been distributed to the members of the committee.
- Focus - Business and Industry Involvement
 - Small Business and Entrepreneurship – share information
 - Co-ops, internships, apprenticeships
 - Soft skills/technical skills, skilled trades

- Pre-employment training
- Industry/Education Alliance – aligning with Education Committee
- Company input – find out what businesses in the Black Belt want and need
- Ready to work, college and Career Ready, Work Keys and Study Guide
- Parent education – talking about technical education versus four year college education
- Attrition rate of workforce
- Reported on new workforce council bill signed by the Governor that creates council made up of business representatives who will report directly to the Governor.
- Proposed issues list:
 - Website with list of resources, link to small business development site,
 - Secure industry involvement,
 - Promote CTE and adult education to include soft skills training,
 - Small business development,
 - Essential/soft skills development,
 - Committee is planning meeting on May 15th.

TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE – Shirley Worthington, Chair – Candy Capel, Project Manager, reported-

- Absent – no report

Candy reported that 90.7 will be going to Gee’s Bend Ferry on May 7th and will transmit from Camden live at 6 p.m.

REGIONAL COUNCIL REPORTS:

John Clyde Riggs, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission:

- Commended Pam Dorr on the work she is doing in Greensboro. He stated he was impressed with her four years ago when they worked on a project together.
- Shows what can be done in small town.
- Reported **Golden Dragon** will have grand opening in May. Currently has 130 employees and will expand to 300 when working at full capacity.
- Sheldon Day is working on large project.
- 75,000 less meals being served now. The RSVP Program in Thomasville is going away.
- We have gone as far as we can go on this matter.

Tyson Howard, South Central Alabama Development Commission:

- Congresswoman Sewell has gone to bat for us and we should all appreciate it.
- Lots of needs in Black Belt; financing is one.
- Rural areas and rural development is a priority.
- Working on several rural employment centers for Black Belt region.

Bob Lake, West Alabama Regional Council:

- We are concerned with rural areas and rural development
- Resources are based on population; Those in power are in populated areas; Huntsville, Birmingham
- Population is down in Hale, Pickens and Greene Counties
- Loss of jobs is devastating
- Commented on expertise around this table

John Zippert - Brought copies of the Greene County Democrat for everyone
Reiterated what Bob Lake said, we feel that voting rights have been taken?

Ron also suggested we have a meeting sometime this year to include members of each committee. It was discussed and **Sheldon** volunteered to host the meeting. This will be discussed at a later date. **Bea** gave her closing remarks and the meeting adjourned for a delicious lunch provided by **Noopie Cosby and Regions Bank.**